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NATURE IN EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE.

The subject of the present paper is not one of a dozen that might be selected as equally illustrative of the development of our literature. The spirit in which an author looks upon external nature reveals in a peculiar way the delicacy of his perception in general and particularly his relations to the literary standards which have been accepted by other men under other circumstances. In a word, it is as good a single test as can easily be found, of the most essential and undying power of literature—its sincerity. It is proposed here to apply this test to the early literature of our own country, and it should be noted that literature in one of its noblest aspects may be best regarded as a social institution, having its origin and growth among the people who are to utilize it as a means of progress and of a common spiritual life. In America the order of development has been political independence, commercial independence, social independence, and lastly literary independence, not even yet entirely achieved.

It may be possible to distinguish certain steps or gradations in the early development of our observation of nature. There was first a growth leading from the more material, business point of view, to that in which the free spirit of man finds in nature something partaking of his own rich emotional and intellectual life, something which he may not utilize, perhaps, or fully understand, but which yields him sympathy and inspiration. The principal purpose of the early travellers and explorers was to enlighten the world, to advance men's knowledge concerning the distinguishing features and characteristic flora and fauna of newly discovered regions. This noble motive was, however, too often contaminated by the desire for mere commercial or territorial gains. Travellers were tempted to ex-

aggerate, because much was expected by those who awaited the returns at home ; there was a tendency to be somewhat inaccurate, because so much must be done in a short time and because there was no one at hand to contradict. Very frequently they underwent the most severe experiences ; what they yield us is won after suffering, fatigue, distrust, and perplexity. Books of travel can, then, rarely be considered literature in the higher sense of the word, but it is not out of place to include them in a general survey of what people wrote and read in some past period. Naturally enough the traveller with his book is very prominent in the early history of America.

But the class just mentioned were wayfarers in the land. Their abiding place was elsewhere, and the more fruitful intimacies with nature were denied them. Time passed and into the new regions came bands of men who made their home there, who labored to understand the mysteries surrounding them, not for the sake of giving information or profit to a distant people, but in order to subdue nature and compel her to yield them the wherewithal to exist. Their relations with the weather, with animal and vegetable life, with rock, river and soil, were close and continuous, but they selected for closest examination only those phenomena that were important in the solution of pressing problems. They tested the soil to find whether it would yield its productive powers to certain kinds of seed ; they rooted out the plant that was noxious to agricultural processes, however attractive it might have been to the man in search of the beautiful. Nature was indeed in many respects more familiar to them than to the ordinary traveller, but it was a familiarity which too often bred contempt—a professional intercourse, not fruitful in literature, because it had no ulterior and universal meaning.

With the next step our forefathers passed from a merely professional and necessary acquaintance with nature to one which is for all men and all time, and embraces every phenomenon, however minute, however ugly, however difficult

to examine—the step which the scientist makes. It is not always easy to indicate the exact point where the observation of nature ceases to be scientific and becomes artistic or poetic. The scientist, pure and simple, seems to stand (in a scale of æsthetic or emotional values), next to the old-school naturalists, these being followed by the writers whom we have learned to call poet-naturalists, then by the poets themselves, and finally by a small, select group whose absorption in nature is even deeper than that of the ordinary poet. We may, perhaps, call this last class nature-mystics. Among their number are a few rare, hardly healthy minds, like Thoreau and Jones Very.

The distinction between a scientific and a poetic observation of nature is generally said to rest in the personal quality of the poet's experience, the absolutely objective and unbiased attitude of the scientist. Certainly in all the higher forms of art produced under a direct inspiration from nature, the emotional element is a strong one, and the whole personality of the observer is awakened, not his intellect merely. But if it is to be an emotion that awakens a sympathetic throb in other men, in distant times and places, it must rest upon no freakish, sudden, and untested experience. Hamerton, in his *Intellectual Life*, speaks of that class of amateur artists who wake up some fine, sunshiny day, and feeling the quickening influence in their veins, go forth with easel and brush to sit by the stream's side and paint their inspiration upon canvas. Great artists are not so made; they require the experience of a thousand preparative days of toil and common-place results before the day of success arrives. There was need, then, for a class of men and women who should live more or less habitually with nature; who should have as close and permanent a contact with it as the pioneers, but in a different mood, and with a different purpose and result. Out-of-door life becomes to such people a daily influence, a recognized element in thought and emotion, and they are willing to partake of the dullness of nature as well as of her inspiration in the days when "the genius of God

doth flow." Nature has been transformed for them and for us through them, and we perceive her uncovered face, worthy of eternal study and eternal reverence. She is no longer an enemy, no longer a mere teacher or chance acquaintance, but a friend who shares the inner life with us.

In order to contrast the scientific, or semi-scientific record of a single phenomenon in nature with that form of description in which the artistic quality—the personal, emotional element—is strong, let us examine the following verses. About 1690, Thomas Makin, a school teacher of Pennsylvania, described the singing of the mocking-bird in these words :

Hic avis est quaedam dulci celeberrima voce,
Quae variare sonos usque canendo solet.

In "Evangeline," Longfellow has, with the same event of nature before him, given us the lines :

Then from a neighboring thicket, the mocking-bird, wildest of singers,
Swinging aloft on a willow spray that hung o'er the water,
Shook from his little throat such floods of delicious music,
That the whole air and the woods and the waves seemed silent to listen.
Plaintive at first were the trees and sad; then soaring to madness
Seemed they to follow or guide the revel of frenzied Bacchantes.
Single notes were heard in sorrowful, low lamentations;
Till, having gathered them all, he flung them abroad in derision,
As when, after a storm, a gust of wind through the tree-tops,
Shakes down the rattling rain in a crystal shower on the branches.

A second series of steps may be further distinguished, progressing from the observation of the plainer features of nature—such as the coloring of the autumn foliage—to the contemplation of those natural phenomena that are revealed only to the careful student and the genuine lover. If the first series indicated a growing purification of motive, the second marks the approach to a true and reliable method. Very early in the history of American literature we find the great streams enrolled—the Hudson, the James, and the Mississippi. The uncertainty of our weather, the severity and long duration of the New England winter, at once found mention in annals and poems, or attempts at poems. The humming-bird by its beauty and marvelously built

frame, the whippoorwill by its strange, foreboding evening note, the robin by his nest-building on every tree in the village, the passenger-pigeons by their multitudinous migrations—all were very soon well known to the settlers. But let us take a still more definite example of what is meant by progress in detailed observation. A German traveller in our country wrote near the beginning of this century :

In the thrush kind America is poor ; there is only the red-breasted robin, which is very common, that can be accounted of that number. There are no sparrows. Very few birds nest in the woods ; a solemn stillness prevails throughout them, interrupted only by the screaming of crows.

Now any lover of birds at the present day, who pretends to familiarity with them in their haunts, recognizes at least three thrushes besides the robin, which are beautiful singers, and whose quality of song is strongly individual. He can mention several, stopping to think, from twelve to twenty distinct species of sparrows, (i. e., of the sparrow family), all of which he knows not merely as one in search of scientific facts, but as a lover of the finer shadings in nature's harmony. The comparatively minute distinction of different emotional and ethical values in the phenomena of nature is in the course of true progress. It marks genuine culture as distinguished from a merely haphazard intelligence, and becomes objectionable only at the point where all analysis does—when in the attention to details the larger outlines are obscured, when the means becomes an end, and the method a cult.¹

It has been customary with many writers, though I believe the latest historians question somewhat the utility of the tradition, to indicate a strong contrast between the colonists of Massachusetts and those of Virginia. Certain differences are, however, well established, and they are of great importance in the treatment of our topic. Let us turn for a moment to the conditions in Virginia. Society there was not so democratic as it was in Plymouth and neighboring

¹ See the very admirable explanation of what a "love of nature" ought to mean, in Mrs. Van Rensselaer's *Art Out of Doors*, chapter xv.

towns. The higher aristocratic circles looked upon nature as English country gentlemen are inclined to view it—as a portion of the vast estate which Providence has kindly given into their keeping as a pleasure ground; a region for fox hunting and sport generally. The background of the life of a Virginia squire was society and politics, as the background of existence to a New England divine was the Church and scholarly industry. The love of the chase and of horse racing, even the zeal of Jefferson in promoting scientific exploration, though most valuable in their way, were very far removed from the mental attitude toward *out-doordom* of Thoreau or Burroughs. The hero of Jamestown's early history recorded many an event of those pioneer days, possibly gave place to one or two that happened only in his own stalwart imagination. Here is a touch of local color which may serve to illustrate the way in which John Smith opened his eyes along the banks of the Chickahominy:

On both sides in the very neck of the Maine are high hills and dales, yet much inhabited, the Ile declining in a plaine fertile corne field, the lower end a marsh; more plentie of swannes, cranes, geese, duckes, and mallards, and diverse sorts of fowles none would desire.

The Pilgrims and Puritans believed that they had found the *unum necessarium* for which the Anglo-Saxon mind is always searching, in a religious life directed by a free conscience. They regarded the body and its material environment as dust and ashes, enemies of the soul, phenomena which the breath of God would one day wipe away. They explored the innermost recesses of their consciousness to find some germ of rebellion against God, but they did not so readily explore the branches of a tree to see if they might find there the nest of some tiny warbler. To the Puritan mind Thoreau gathering berries with the children along the Concord roadside, Audubon standing for hours up to his waist in a swamp, watching a tiny bird build its nest, are ridiculous figures; it learns with difficulty the lesson of deep wisdom conveyed in a sentence of La Fontaine's, "One needs the lesser being." The moralizing tone of one who is

professing simply to examine the operations of nature, does not necessarily offend us; only it must be sincere and personal, not the mere echo of a convention, the insertion of something for the sake of answering the expectations of the pious. Even in reading Bryant, we do not always feel that the moral grows naturally and inevitably out of the events of nature which have produced in him a poetic exaltation. We are inclined to suspect most men of insincerity or of dull vision, if in every slight observation they make of nature, they perceive at once a special dispensation of Providence. The old "argument from design" is not yet lost, but it rests upon far broader and deeper grounds than it did even at the beginning of the century.

Yet with all this restriction it has been the New Englander who has done the most to record and explain the life of bird and plant and insect in the spirit of the poet and the poet-naturalist. In "Our Forefathers' Song" which has been traced as far back as 1630, there are several references to the relations of the colonists with nature. They may not be considered very poetical, but they give us a great deal of solid information. Of the maize it is said:

And when it is come to full corn in the ear
It is often destroyed by raccoon and by deer.

And here are a few lines in which every person with New England blood in his veins will see a vision of Thanksgiving time:

Our pumpkins and parsnips are common supplies,
We have pumpkins at morning, pumpkins at noon,
If it was not for pumpkins we should be undone.
If barley be wanting to make into malt
We must be contented and think it no fault,
For we can make liquor to sweeten our lips
Of pumpkins and parsnips and walnut tree chips.

There appeared, also, in New England very soon after the founding of Plymouth, a woman poet who was so fortunate as to win the title of "The Tenth Muse". Mrs. Anne Bradstreet seems to have aimed at making a universal encyclopædia of her book of poetry. In fact, it is a liberal edu-

cation to read even the title. Yet in the midst of long, pedantic dissertations on the four monarchies of antiquity, and summaries of all that was known about the four elements, we find slight but genuine touches of nature. The poetess appears sometimes to have forgot that she was not upon the soil of Old England, and yet it was probably from her own observations that she wrote :

I heard the merry grasshopper then sing,
The black-clad cricket bear a second part;
They kept one tune and played on the same string,
Seeming to glory in their little art.

She noted also that :

The primrose pale and azure violet
Among the verdurous grass hath nature set.
* * * * *
The fearful bird his little house now builds
In trees and walls, in cities and in fields;
The outside strong, the inside warm and neat.

Omitting all mention of numerous minor writers who flourished in the seventeenth century and in the early part of the eighteenth, I pass to one whose name is familiar, at least to all lovers of botany. John Bartram, from the importance of his historical position, and no less from the inherent interest of his career, deserves to be considered a classical figure among our early naturalists. He began, in 1734, a correspondence with Peter Collinson, of London, which continued for over a generation, and at various times he was in communication with many of the most learned men of science in America and in Europe. Franklin was his personal friend and Linnæus called him the greatest self-taught botanist in the world. The good Quaker's interest in plants was largely a practical one. His letters reveal little that has the charm of White's "Natural History of Selborne", which was being written about the same time that John Bartram was coming into prominent notice. But the figure of the man himself, his sturdy independence, his need of intellectual satisfaction, which in the humble language

of the time he called "curiosity", his wide and fruitful travel, his garden upon the banks of the Schuylkill to which he gathered choice plants from every accessible region—all these combined to make one of the most attractive figures of the eighteenth century. Bartram lived to a good old age, nearly reaching three score and ten, and passing away during the early days of the Revolutionary War. His death, according to some accounts, was hastened by his anxiety lest the occupation of Philadelphia by the British might cause some injury to his botanical accumulations in the neighborhood. The "American Farmer" to whom we shall refer later on, thus relates the story of John Bartram's conversion to botany as it fell from the enthusiast's lips:

I scarcely know how to trace my steps in the botanical career; they appear to me now like unto a dream, but thee mayest rely on what I shall relate, though I know that some of my friends have laughed at it. One day I was very busy in holding my plow, (for thou seest that I am but a plowman), and being weary I ran under the shade of a tree to repose myself. I cast my eyes on a daisy; I plucked it mechanically, and viewed it with more curiosity than common country farmers are wont to do, and observed therein very many distinct parts, some perpendicular and some horizontal. What a shame, said my mind, or something that inspired my mind, that thee shouldst have employed so many years in tilling the earth, and destroying so many flowers and plants, without being acquainted with their structures and their uses! I returned to my team, but this new desire did not quit my mind.

Genial old John continued the story, telling his listener that a few days after the incident in the field he hired a man to do his plowing and went into Philadelphia, not knowing exactly what he was after, but with a vague feeling that he might find in the city help toward his proposed botanical studies. He soon mastered the essentials of Latin nomenclature, and in spite of his wife's apparent disapproval, he mainly devoted himself to the investigation of plants for the rest of his days.

Dull reading as is the mass of Bartram's correspondence, there are passages in it very remarkable for sly mother-wit or unconscious humor. There is more than a touch of pathos, too, in his oft repeated complaint that he can find

very few persons in the colonies who take any interest in his beloved pursuits. He himself is so enthusiastic that his friend across the water in busy London, again and again admonishes him not to devote himself so entirely to natural history as to neglect his more regular and financially productive occupations. He wrote habitually as a mere chronicler of nature, though now and then his enthusiasm finds utterance in highly rhetorical passages. Scarcely a hint of the living and beautiful thought of the "Lines to a Water Fowl" is found in the old naturalist's brief description of a bird migration, though this phenomenon contains the material for many poems :

Our Hooping cranes, in their passage from Florida to Hudson's Bay, fly in flocks of about a half a score, so exceeding high as scarcely to be observed but by the particular noise of their loud hooping. We then can but just see them, though so particularly directed where to look for them.

John Bartram made many long and fatiguing travels in the course of his life, in search of new wonders in the vegetable world. Even in old age his zeal was unabated. He had the satisfaction of knowing that he left to the world the result of his labor, in the flourishing garden which slopes down to the Schuylkill, and in many a curious plant which through his effort was rooted in the soil of England. He left a still better heritage, for his son William, the "Billy" of many letters, attained a fame as great as that of his father. He made extensive travels in the interests of natural history, and published, in 1791, an account of the vegetation and Indian tribes of Florida and the regions to the west. At the beginning of this century he probably knew more about the birds of America than any other man, and his friendship with Alexander Wilson is one of the most beautiful that the scientific annals of our country can show.

But there was living in America at the time when Franklin and other sober minded men were listening with intense anxiety to the mutterings of the coming Revolution, a genuine man of letters and one who had deep sympathy with the

life of nature, Hector St. John de Crevecœur, born a Frenchman, the author of *Letters from an American Farmer*. No man in America who has left any records to posterity from the eighteenth century, reveals a spirit more akin to that of the poet-naturalists of our own day. Yet he was entirely a man of his own times, breathing the atmosphere of *Paul and Virginia* and *Studies from Nature*, and showing the unmistakable influence of Rousseau. In a singularly charming style he idealizes the agricultural life in the colonies just prior to the separation from the mother country—idealizes and yet pictures with a fidelity growing out of actual and long continued acquaintance. He says of his letters: "If they be not elegant, they will smell of the woods and be a little wild," and he is, in general, true to his promise. He wishes to put "on paper a few American wild cherry trees, such as nature forms them here, in all her unconfined vigor, in all the amplitude of their extended limbs and spreading ramifications." When Burns was but a lad entering his teens, this husbandman of New York declared the possibility of a union of plowman and man of letters: "After all why should not a farmer be allowed to make use of his mental faculties as well as others? Because a man works is he not to think, and if he thinks usefully why should he not in his leisure hours set down his thoughts? I have composed many a good sermon as I followed my plow," and he proceeds to give the highest praise to the art of tilling as an aid to reflection. In beautiful and adequate language he gives many of the picturesque details of the farmer's life; shows us his little boy seated gleefully upon a chair which is attached to the swaying plow; shares with us his doubt as to whether he ought to consider the kingbirds friends or enemies. The severities of winter drive the quails to his barn door, where he permits them to search for grain in security. While his less sympathizing neighbors are perhaps trapping the defenceless birds, he is carrying food to them as they stand almost freezing "in the angles of the fences where the motion of

the wind prevents the snow from settling," and for this trouble he is well repaid by the merry whistlings of the thankful birds which resound across his fields in spring. He traces the vagrant bees to their storehouse of honey in some tree hidden in the depths of the forest, and gives us a relation of the hunt with a picturesqueness which will bear comparison with the corresponding description of Burroughs. He rises regularly in the dim dawn, and it is not the "feathered tribes" which give a charm to the morning hours; it is "the sweet love tales of our robins told from tree to tree," the shrill notes of the catbird, and the melodious voice of the thrush singing from the swaying tree tops. In his piazza, it is not the old-world swallow alone that builds, but also the phœbe bird, as she builds yet, after the lapse of a century and a quarter, after the cannonadings of three great wars. The birds in which he is interested are those that nest, scold, preen their feathers, and teach their young to fly, about his own domicile. A score of writers had already pictured the marvelous tints of the humming-bird, but Crevecœur does not rest content with what were already commonplaces. He has noticed that "this insect-bird . . . will tear and lacerate flowers into a hundred pieces;" that two humming birds will fight as furiously as wild beasts until one falls a sacrifice to this strange ferocity. And wasps and snakes he has observed with the same accurate and steady eye.¹

In spite of the sway of Pope's maxim that "the proper study of mankind is man," England had produced Shenstone, in 1714, and from 1726 to 1730 James Thomson was publishing his "Seasons". The roots of the pastoral lie very deep down in the soil of classical literature. As a form of English poetry it was an importation and frequently a weak imitation, lacking the note of vitality and sincerity

¹ Hazlitt contributed an excellent criticism of Crevecœur to the *Edinburgh Review* for 1829. I regret that considerations of space prevent citation from it as well as any description of the pathos of Crevecœur's last years.

that accompanies all nobler poetry. This gentle shepherd life led in the English valleys and on English downs by Colin, Damon, Strephon, by love-sick swains of every name that had a Latin smack; by nymphs who answered to any appellation provided it ended in *a*—Delia, Phyllida, Camilla, Matilda, Flavia, Roxana, and the rest—was a very attractive theme to many poets of the time. They dreamed of rural dances to the music of oaten pipes; they watched, while very probably sitting amidst the snug comforts of a scholar's library, the snow white flocks move slowly along under the rays of Phœbus or Cynthia, and listened to the shouts of the revellers at shearing time. Gray's "Elegy" was written by 1751, and this together with Thomson's "Seasons" and Shenstone's poems, particularly his "Schoolmistress" seems to have been a great favorite with American readers, giving rise to innumerable imitations.

In the midst of a slavery to the didactic and pastoral muses, the American Revolution and the constitutional struggle following, fostered a poet, who, if he was not great, was in a true sense original and national. Philip Freneau was born in 1752, but he lived to see the Bunker Hill Monument dedicated and the railroad system of the United States begun. His face is a noble one, showing the characteristics of the man of action rather than the thinker, and yet not without its revelation of a poetic imagination. Freneau was distinctively the poet of American freedom, of the incidents of a war for liberty, yet he saw clearly the elements in Indian life which were capable of an emotional treatment, and gained inspiration from more than one of our native flowers. It seems impossible that the feeling—still genuine and true, though time has made the poems themselves obsolete—of "The Indian Burying Ground," the "Indian Student" "To a Honey-bee," and the "Wild Honeysuckle" could come to one who did not love and enter into communion with the solitudes of wood and field.

About Freneau there cluster in the last two decades of the eighteenth century a band of men and women still dom-

inated by British influence, and writing in general either poetry that is scarcely verse or verse that is scarcely poetry, who were nevertheless, in their way, lovers and actual observers of nature. While it took a long time for some poets to learn that no nightingale sings in America, they yet had a positive conviction of the power and beauty of the mocking-bird's song. The influence of Rousseau and of St. Pierre are very clearly traceable throughout the poetry of this period. There was much talk of retirement from the hated world; of a philosophic seclusion on the banks of the Schuylkill, Connecticut, or Ohio. "Rural philosophers", who were most probably lawyers in Baltimore, or in Philadelphia, wrote heart-rending adieux to society, and sang the delights of hermit life. In the minor details of bird song and flower color, there was indeed some uncertainty. Thus in respect to the whippoorwill, all agree that it sings at night, but with one writer (1789) who gives us a poetical invitation to the country, it is a bird that

. cheers the night
With her sweet notes, which sleep invite,

whereas, Mr. Richard Alsop, a young gentleman of Connecticut, in a poem called "The Charms of Fancy", written about the same time, sings of one witnessing the decay of civilization:

No human voice he hears—the desert plain
Knows but the whippoorwill's funereal strain,
The hern's hoarse clang, or sea-gull's lonely cry,
Joined with the moan of winds, that sadly sigh
O'er many a shattered pile and broken stone
Of sculptured form in mournful unison.

One who reads over the mass of the rhymed productions of that time may be inclined to agree with William Clifton who wrote in the next to the last year of the century:

In these cold shades, beneath these shifting skies,
Where Fancy sickens and where Genius dies,
Where few and feeble are the Muses' strains,
And no fine frenzy riots in the veins.

Nevertheless Clifton himself sang simply and well a little ditty to the robin. The linnet, too, the yellow-bird, and the turtle-dove had entered the groves of Parnassus; and Colonel David Humphreys had written a "Poem on the Happiness of America" in which he faithfully and fully described many characteristics of our winter season, in a style not unworthy to precede "The Cotter's Saturday Night" and "Snow-Bound". The ærial evolutions at evening of the woodcock and the night-hawk had both been noted in verse as well as the shrill, prolonged note of the locust, the berry-gathering of the children in the fall, and their robbery of the squirrel's gathered store. And while the poets naturally inclined to take the more picturesque side of the question whether swallows hibernated or not—a question which disturbed very much the philosophic minds of Gilbert White and other naturalists of that day—writers on the other side were not wanting. In the columns of the *Museum*, for 1788, one gentleman gives as the result of his personal observations in the open fields: "That they are properly amphibious I believe that no one will contend."

It was probably Thomson who taught our lovers of rural life, but certainly they had learned to find charms in the whole round year. Some of them tramped the woods when the snows lay thick over the buried leaves; when scarcely a bird was stirring,

. save the lone woodpecker
Beating with hardened bill the deadened stump.

On some hill-side where the wind swept cold, they stopped to catch

. . . from the echoing woods the sounding stroke
Of woodcutter felling the sturdy oak.

Near the beginning of our century the forces of new, vigorous life which were fermenting in the Old World began to have a wide influence in America. In the decade from 1790 to 1800 Wordsworth had published "An Evening Walk" and "Lyrical Ballads"; Carlyle, Keats, and Shel-

ley had been born ; while Cowper's "Task," and the first volume of Burns's poems came in the middle years of the eighties. In America the publication of Brown's early novels, the establishment of Dennie's *Portfolio* in the first year of the new century, and of the Boston *Monthly Anthology*, in 1803, were indications that our slowly awakening literary personality was coming to consciousness.

As editor of the *Portfolio* Dennie gave place to a vast number of pastoral pieces of entirely British tone, but only grudgingly and under a sense of compulsion. He knew what he was about. He accepted, in 1806, a stinging burlesque upon the popular pastoral conventions, and in the first volume of the *Portfolio* he wrote to a contributor : "The pastoral dialogue between two shepherds of Schuylkill we are obliged to reject with some degree of loathing. Nothing can be more insipid than this style of writing. 'The oaten reed' and 'the skipping lamb', the 'brawling brook' and the 'whispering breeze' are images of most egregious triteness. It is an established rule with the editor when he finds an epitaph upon a "Departed Patriot," "Elegy upon a Dead Girl," or a pastoral, to twirl over the leaf with a sort of instinctive abhorrence." This was unjust to pastoral poetry as a legitimate form of writing, but it was a wholesome dose for the crude and careless versifiers who sent spring effusions to the office in Philadelphia. In inserting a prose or poetical piece which had value because it was distinctively American, Dennie very often pointed out that merit ; frequently the author himself noted it. The "Rural Wanderer" in the very first number of the magazine assures us that he is "really a rambler over hills and through glades, along the banks of rivers and in the borders of villages."

After a more or less close study of the *Portfolio* from 1801 to the date of "Thanatopsis," and of the *Anthology* for about half that period, I note three facts which it may be well to specify as evidence of our growing interest and independence in the study of out-door life.

First: There is a noticeable awakening on the part of the more intelligent writers to the facts of our American nature. They had learned that there was a literary and a personal, as well as a scientific meaning in the simple statement of White of Selborne: "It is, I find, in zoölogy as it is in Botany, all nature is so full that that district produces the greatest variety that is the most examined."

Second: There had arisen a small class of writers who more or less *habitually* reported nature as they personally observed her. They did not, indeed, retire into a semi-seclusion from society as Thoreau did, but out-door life permanently interested them; it was that which gave health and tone to their mental operations, and they found it a source of private and literary inspiration. One of these true lovers of nature, although I believe he was a Philadelphia journalist, wrote for the *Portfolio* a series of "Reflections in Solitude", and signed himself "Jacques". He records with a careful, discriminating attention, albeit in somewhat of a pessimistic mood, the changing phenomena of woods and fields and farm yards as the season rolls by. With him we

Mark how the fallen, withered leaves are borne,
In whirlpool motion on the Western blast,
That whistles round the oak—now herald-like,
They sweep along the surface of the wood,
To tell a covey that the autumn tempts
The sportsman's stroll.

Like Burroughs and most of our acute observers of the winter's landscape, he notices the predominant bird of the December sky.

High in the air, far off, I yet can mark,
Flapping his wings, the shy and slow winged crow,
Bending his course towards the dark brown wood.

Third: About 1807 or 1808, the *Portfolio* began to give its readers an occasional view of American scenery, sketched and engraved by home talent and intended to foster a love for the natural beauty and sublimity lying at

our own doors. For a long time previous the claim had been constantly made that our rivers, cataracts, forests, and mountains were as noble as those of foreign lands, and that they were commonly neglected and despised.

The two men whose names stand out most prominently from the oblivion which has kindly covered most of the literary work of the first decade of our century, Charles Brockden Brown and Alexander Wilson, were radically different in their relation to nature, though both were undoubted geniuses, breaking their way through the mists of convention into the sunlight of independence and original effort. Regarding the novelist, the criticism of Richard Henry Dana remains an essentially true one: "Of all men of imagination we know of none who appear from their writings to have looked less at nature or to have been less open to her influences. . . . A power of his kind knows no association with nature; for in the gloomiest and the wildest and the barrenest scenes of nature there is something enlarging and elevating—something that tells us there is an end to all unmixed sorrow."

The story of Alexander Wilson has been told many times and the main outlines of his life are familiar to most reading Americans. But his fame and labor as an ornithologist have unfortunately tended to obscure the fact that he was, as "Christopher North," (in *Blackwood's*) declared him to be, "absolutely a man of literature." His poetry is not so good as his prose, but he continued to write it as long as he lived. In his youth he drank in the spirit of Burns, of nature in Scottish moor and brae. He wandered over many a mile of Scottish sea-coast and mountain, noting the ways of bird and man, the mists on the highlands and the storied ruins of castles. In the year in which Bryant was born, Alexander Wilson landed on the coast of Delaware, a young man not yet thirty, with all the enthusiasm of youth and the incalculable resources of genius. His career from beginning to end will bear an examination such as that of few other men could undergo. Wilson developed in his great

work considerable scientific power; as a teacher and as a man of steady intellectual appetite, he did not disdain the labored analyses of the classifiers. But it cannot be too distinctly remembered that what he loved was nature herself. Before the conception of a study of all the birds of this country had matured in his mind, he had written a long descriptive poem, called "The Foresters," which had grown out of his own observations made upon a pedestrian journey to the Falls of Niagara. The trip gave to this man of wide open eyes the possibility of picturing truly many of the most characteristic scenes and customs of what was then a pioneer region.

Wilson was a patriot, a scientist, a poet, something of an artist, but more than all these a lover of nature. It was fitting that a man of his particular passions and achievements should have very early received the distinctive appellation of poet-naturalist.¹ Yet he was still more than poet-naturalist, for he revealed the essential qualities of genius? It is, says Dr. Elliott Coues, creating a definition which would be true of Alexander Wilson, "that union of Passion and Patience, which bears fruit unknown to Passion alone, to Patience alone impossible."

The year after Wilson had published his prospectus for the *American Ornithology*, there appeared in the *Monthly Anthology* (June, 1808) a criticism of a poem, called "The Embargo" and purporting to have been written by a lad of thirteen. The reviewer is in general favorable and is kind enough to say: "If the young bard has met with no assistance in the composition of the poem, he certainly bids fair, should he continue to cultivate his talent, to gain a respectable station on the Parnassian mount and to reflect credit on the literature of his country." But it was by no mere cultivation of the muse which gave birth to "The Embargo," a political satire after the manner of Pope, that five years later the boy of seventeen was able to write "Thanatopsis."

¹ I have the impression that this name was first used in characterizing him; it was certainly given to him before Thoreau had won it.

Mighty influences were at work upon Bryant. He began to feel the throb of the new and higher spirit of poetry that ruled in the "Lyrical Ballads." Nature also, whom he had loved from childhood and with whom he lived at peace, in a growing sympathy, overpowered the monarch of the Augustan Age. The transition from "The Embargo" to "Thanatopsis" is not a development; it is a revolution, a new birth; the declaration of a spiritual being. Though still moralizing and retaining to some extent a conventional tone, Bryant in "Thanatopsis" threw off the yoke of academic authority and ecclesiasticism. He looked upon the endless procession journeying to the silent halls, under the limitations of the Anglo-Saxon race, if you will, but no longer as a literary feigner, no longer merely as a Puritan. "Thanatopsis" was composed under the influences of actual New England skies and forests, yet it has a trace more of subservience to British tradition than "The Yellow Violet" which was written in 1814. With that poem we may well begin a new era in the influence of nature upon our literature. Bryant was the giant among his compeers, but he was not alone in his studies afield. A host of minor singers flourished about this time, who felt the breath of the wind on their brows—Wilcox, Sprague, Drake, Hillhouse, Percival, Prentice, and Fitz-Greene Halleck among them. The old era had passed away, both in England and in America. Brown, Dennie, and Wilson, the three men who had made Philadelphia a literary centre of no mean significance, died within a few years of each other, at just the time when "Childe Harold" and "Queen Mab" appeared. The year of "The Yellow Violet" saw "Waverley" and "The Excursion."

The results of this study of the early development of the observation of nature in America are not extensive, yet the progress of the investigation itself may not have been valueless. Over and over again it is necessary to learn the lesson that the true evolution of literature and of society knows no real cataclysm. From the beginning of colonization

until the present day, there have been writers in America seeing with interest and with pleasure what nature has set before their eyes ; whose conscious life has been, to a greater or less extent, molded by her constant presence. As our national life has deepened, as it has grown away from the restraints of false and foreign domination, more and more the nobler yearnings of man's spirit have asserted themselves. All that was genuine in our early poetry and prose, however humble and imperfect, had a share in the influences which made possible Bryant, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and gave to each a loving, understanding audience. We need have no regrets for the loss of so much of the literature of nature as lacked sincerity. It is not dead. It is simply non-existent, for as Thoreau said, "in order to die, it is necessary first *to have lived.*"

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